

U.S. Supreme Court should give juveniles the chance to prove they've changed

Gregory J. Boyle | Mar. 19, 2012



Louis Perez

Opinion

I suppose it was difficult to imagine Louis Perez changing course. He was only 14 years old when I met him in a probation camp, and yet, he seemed entrenched in the deepest, lethal absence of hope. Unable at that young age to transform his pain of abuse, abandonment and torture, he seemed set on a path doomed to transmit his pain forever.

Now, almost 20 years later, after considerable prison time and having been stuck in a desperate cycle of gang violence and drugs, Louis runs things for me at Homeboy Industries, the nation's largest gang rehab and re-entry program.

It shouldn't surprise us that children and teenagers aren't the same people once they become adults.

Kids grow and have an infinite capacity for redemption. They change and respond to positive attention and are able, ultimately, to inhabit the truth of who they are: exactly what God intended when he made them.

In recent years, the United States Supreme Court has recognized adolescents' enormous capacity for change. Every parent knows the treacherous waters of their kid's adolescence: immaturity, testing, peer pressure and a susceptibility to negative influences. If you add to this "normal" phase abandonment, torture, abuse and

violence, then what a teenager has to carry becomes even more of a burden. The court struck down the death penalty for juveniles and life imprisonment without parole sentences for most juvenile offenses because it recognized juveniles as less morally responsible for their wrongdoing than adult offenders. But every parent knows this.

The court sees that a juvenile has this great capacity to be transformed, and so rehabilitation is not just hoped for and possible, but it is what adults have come to expect from teenagers -- they will move beyond this immature, sometimes alarming moment into a fully mature adult.

Only a fool would have tried to predict the full trajectory of Louis' troubled youth. It turned out he was able to become a productive citizen, law-abiding member of the community, father, husband and a mentor at Homeboy Industries to the younger "homies" trying to imagine their futures instead of planning their funerals.

Starting Tuesday, the court will hear oral arguments in [Jackson v. Hobbs](#) [1] and [Miller v. Alabama](#) [2], two cases that ask the court to decide whether it is constitutional to sentence children as young as 14 to die in prison. Anyone familiar with kids -- parents, teachers and others who work with them -- knows that a 14-year-old is irresponsible, immature, impulsive and vulnerable in ways adults simply are not. Change is the task of every teenager. We don't just nurture that change, but we honor the capacity and bright promise of its certainty.

Louis is no longer that "knucklehead kid" he was at 14. He has moved assuredly to a place of extraordinary healing and a stance of generative goodness and wholeness that would not have seemed possible at 14. He was held accountable for his actions, for sure, but what a waste of life, time and resources, if he had been condemned at 14 to a life without the possibility of hope and redemption.

We measure the health of our society in exactly those ways we treat our children and seek to shape them into healthy adults. For those kids who have found themselves gravitating to trouble, we offer hope, guidance and the endless possibility of rehabilitation. We remain the only country on the planet that sentences children to die in prison. We all agree that we are better than that.

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